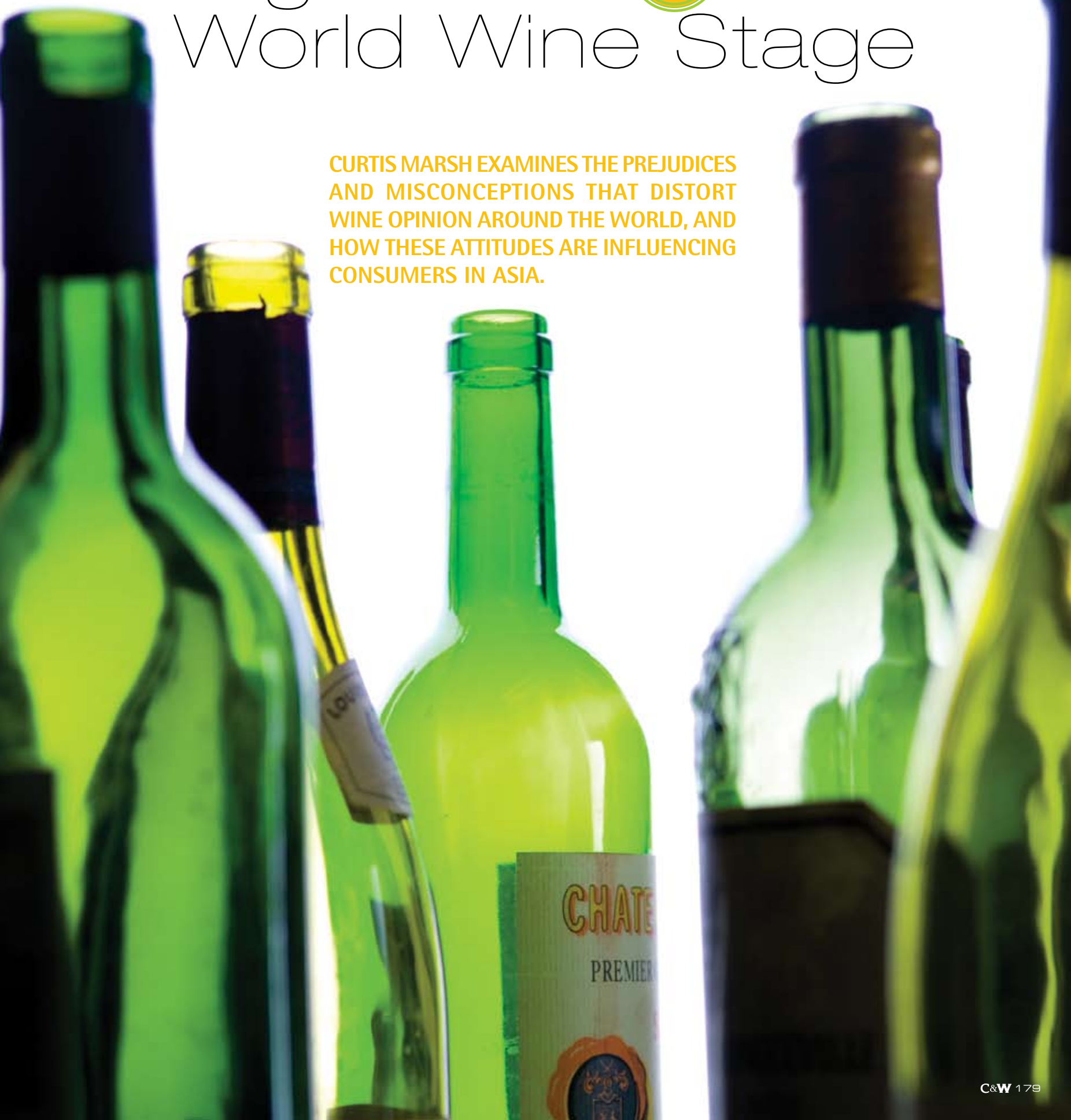


Irregularities On The World Wine Stage

CURTIS MARSH EXAMINES THE PREJUDICES AND MISCONCEPTIONS THAT DISTORT WINE OPINION AROUND THE WORLD, AND HOW THESE ATTITUDES ARE INFLUENCING CONSUMERS IN ASIA.



There are many inconsistencies on the world wine stage when it comes to perceived wine quality, popularity (or unpopularity) of particular grape varieties, wine styles, regions or even entire countries. Sometimes, these anomalies have a rational explanation, yet in many instances there are perplexing and illogical evaluations or warped idealisms that render even the unquestionable quality of a highly regarded wine irrelevant and banished to consumer oblivion. Although we are dealing with an acutely subjective indulgence blurred by introspective personal tastes and unpredictable biases, ardent consumer patriotism in wine producing countries is a most evident criterion – there is nothing more potent than nationalism when it comes to forming wine opinion. For example, if you are French, it is highly unlikely that you will be convinced other wine producing countries in the world can match the vinous supremacy of France. Likewise, if you are Italian you will doubtlessly defend Italy's myriad of wines (and all its eccentricities) with an animated, passionate rhetoric of regional tipicità (typical or authentic) and conduciveness to food. But it is not just the Old World that has entrenched wine parochialism. Case in point: the rivalry between Australia and New Zealand's wine consuming public (despite mutual British ancestry and a Commonwealth bond) is as equally vehement as the two countries clashing in rugby or cricket. Despite the blinkered views of these indigenous consumers, there is an overwhelming rationale that encompasses the natural affinity with local food and customs, particularly so in Europe. The abundance and affordability of good wine also justifies the proneness to local products. Whilst the New World has generally become more accepting of imports, exporting wine to European wine producing countries is like as they say, coals to Newcastle. No matter how exceptional and reputable the wine, it is likely to be relegated to curio status.

Local Loyalists

Next up is good old fashioned rivalry – prevalent between different regions and, obviously, not exclusive to wine. There are often historical, cultural and even religious divisions between opposing regions, coupled with the timeless competitive nature of human beings (a powerful force on its own) that often goes beyond the boundaries of 'good sport' with corruptive and prejudicial behaviour. Let's just say, you would not want to bring a bottle of Bordeaux to a Burgundian's dinner table. Similarly, fronting up in Piedmont with a bottle from Tuscany is not wise. This state of mind applies equally to the New World winemaking countries. Take your average Sydney-sider in New South Wales, Australia, extolling the virtues of Hunter Valley wines whilst dismissing those overrated wines from down south in Victoria. Even the New Zealanders, who are known for their friendly and cohesive approach, admit a clandestine rivalry exists between wineries in the North Island and South Island. This regional pride invariably localises down to towns and villages or communes, with the presumed superiority of the surrounding vineyards fiercely defended against rival neighbours. Look no further than Germany's obsessive deliberations over classifying their distinguished individual vineyards or the contentious debates over the differentials of Burgundy's appellations and comparisons of supremacy between Grand Cru, Premier Cru and lieu-dit, when in many cases you can stand with a foot in one vineyard and the other in the adjacent vineyard. There are also entrenched loyalties in the metropolises with many wine regions exceedingly dependant on the surrounding population, whom also have a significant impact on wine styles and the grape

varieties grown, regardless of their suitability to the climate or terroir. For example, Parisians have a longstanding preference for wines from the Loire Valley, particularly idiosyncratic reds such as Bourgeuil, Chinon and Sancerre Rouge – esoteric wines that have little following in the international market. Similarly, on the other side of the planet, the inhabitants of Adelaide and its environs who are surrounded by the Barossa Valley, Clare Valley and McLaren Vale wine regions and raised on Herculean Shirazes, will turn up their noses at Pinot Noir. In total contrast, Melbournians, encircled by Pinot Noir producers, deem it to be unquestionably the most fashionable red variety – despite the area's climate being suitable to all number of varieties. Likewise, as the status of the Oregon and Willamette Valley wine regions have risen, the palates of Seattle citizens have become conspicuously accommodating of Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris.

Wine Choices In Asia

Local biases aside, of the 867 grape varieties listed in the exhaustive *Oxford Wine Companion* (this does not include the countless indigenous clones), it is mind-boggling how few make the cut on the international wine stage. Since early Roman times, the wider popularity of grape varieties is largely determined by its ability to travel or adapt to new environments and, above all, fashion. Let's exclude the ambitions of China and India to become significant producers of western-style table wine and accept that in general, the wider Asia region does not produce premium wine. So fundamentally, neither patriotism nor regional bias should affect wine consumerism. Therefore, let's draw a comparison with the metropolises of Asia to the UK wine market, which hypothetically has no allegiances (although Claret does have a strong history) and has a relatively impartial approach to buying wine. Albeit, it is still susceptible to the fickleness of fashion. The UK and London wine market is, of course, a lot more evolved and extremely price competitive. Indeed, it is viewed as the epicentre of the global wine trade with both the wine press and consumers greatly influencing wine drinking trends worldwide, corroborated by its vinous neutrality. (Well, at least presently. This could well change with global warming!) There is the significant expatriate population in Asia to consider, who bring with them their loyalties and enthusiasm to propagate their motherland products. However, despite this discernible influence, it is the domestic consumer who ultimately shapes the market.

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It is apparent however, that Asian consumers are not impartial at all, and in fact are deeply embroiled in the topical rivalry between the so-called 'New World' versus the 'Old World' of wine – a division which goes beyond individual countries. When it comes to premium wine or the perception of high-quality, Asian sentiment is monopolised by the Old World, referring to the European producers seemingly cemented in tradition with an overriding aura of historical pre-eminence. More explicitly, the Asian consumer is so enraptured with Bordeaux that the wine region has become a symbol of one's success and status, to the point of being a vinous shrine. In contrast, the New World – that is everyone other than Europe, which includes North America, Chile, Argentina, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa – is often treated in Asia with a Johnny-come-lately contempt by the wine cognoscenti or demoted in status by the average consumer. There are however, many contradictions in this polemic. Notwithstanding the globalisation of wine and stylistic blurring, if not merging of the two factions, for example the polarised idealisms in the Bordeaux region with the so-called *garagiste* (small garage-sized) producers of St Emilion and Pomerol making more profound wines that many feel are closer in style to Californian Cabernets than classic elegant Bordeaux Claret.

There are also two glaring misconceptions. Firstly, that *terroir*, the total vineyard environment with an emphasis on soil and inferring ancient geological evolution, is exclusive to the Old World (particularly France, which blatantly exploits this). Thus, the second misconception is that the oldest vines must also only exist in Europe. In actual fact, the most ancient *terroir* is found on the continent of Australia, forged at the beginning of earth's formation with some of the oldest rocks in the world (3.7 billion years old). As for old vines, it is also a fact that Australia has some of the oldest vines in the world, having escaped the vine louse *phylloxera* that devastated vineyards around the world by the end of the 19th century. Indeed, there are numerous Australian vineyards with vines past their 100th birthday and substantiated evidence that the oldest Cabernet Sauvignon vines in the world (142

years old) reside in Penfold's Barossa Valley 'Kalimna' vineyard. There is also the assumption that the 'New World' is responsible for all the modern techniques and agents provocateurs of commercialising or stripping wines of their regional personality. Yet look behind the often quaint and charming facades of wineries and you will find most that most chemical additives, whether natural or synthetic, largely come from Europe – these include enzymes, flavour enhancers, colouring agents, grape concentrates and tannins, oak essences, and state-of-the-art manipulative winery machinery. Take for example the controversial process of micro-oxygenation. This technique and machinery was invented by Frenchman Patrick Ducournau to combat the exceedingly tannic wines made from the Tannat grape in the Madiran region of southern France. The technique was quickly and widely adopted by Bordelaise as the process increases aromatic intensity and softens tannins, while at the same time increasing the body of the wine with a rounder mouth-feel. It also decreases vegetal-herbaceous aromas (normally a product of under-ripe grapes) as well as removes reduction characters that are known to be proportionally higher in Cabernet Sauvignon. All of this sounds pretty good really; like making a silk purse from a sow's ear. This technology is now widespread throughout the world with over two thousand of the machines serviced by the inventor's consulting company. Sometimes, I wonder which faction (Old World or New World) is more abreast of pertinent technology and how to best balance it with tradition and nature. With such advances in the science of wine chemistry and botany, alongside mechanical ingenuity, I fear we are in danger of artificially synthesising an otherwise purely natural beverage.

Concurrently, there has been a fermenting professional jealousy between the Old World and New World winemakers, particularly with the French, who seem exasperated by the fact that Australia has unseated France as the biggest selling country by volume in the strategic UK market. Yet, there is a delicious irony here – as Australia struggles to meet economies of scale and demand in the market it has doggedly pursued, because of drought and global warming it is now struggling to reposition the reputation it needs and arguably deserves for premium wine. Whilst many of these anomalies can be in part, attributed to a lack of consumer awareness, the misrepresentation of wines from an entire country in the wider Asia market is peculiarly unjust – here, I am thinking of America, Germany, Austria, Spain, and Portugal. Importers play a pivotal role here. They are largely ultra-conservative, dictating what we drink, yet few are willing to take risks or punt on the next wine trend or niche market that is clearly ripe for expansion. It is time more importers in Asia woke up to what the rest of the wine-savvy world is thriving on.

A preponderance of importers in Asia are also fixated on cheap wines that facilitate profiteering throughout the resale chain, adding credence to the widely held theory that Asia is a dumping ground for wine. Then there is Asia's fixation on wine scores, a deeply controversial topic that I will explore in a future column. CM

